

TEACHING METHODS IN THE P.U.S.

II. PICTURE STUDY.

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It is true that “we speak that we do know and testify that we have seen” but that of which we speak to-day came to us so largely from Charlotte Mason that I wish to begin by reading to you some words of hers. She says:—

“Our aim in education is to give children vital interests in as many directions as possible the curriculum which should give children their full due falls into some six or eight groups—Religion, History, Languages, Mathematics, Science, Art, Physical Exercises and Manual Crafts but perhaps the main part of a child’s education should be concerned with the great human relationships, relationships of love and service, of authority and obedience, of reverence and pity and neighbourly kindness; relationships to kin and friend and neighbour, to cause and country and kind, to the past and the present. Now history, literature, archæology, art, languages, travel and tales of travel are in one way or another the record or the expression of persons, and we who are persons are interested in all persons for we are all one flesh and we are all of one spirit and whatever any of us does or suffers is interesting to the rest.”

To-day, we are to consider Picture Study as one of the means of establishing human relationships; Picture Talk, Picture Study or Art Studies, as the subject is variously described in the Lower, Middle and Upper Forms respectively.

Our aim is to make the children as widely acquainted as possible with the Literature of Art, that they may be familiar with some at any rate of the works of great painters in the same way that they are familiar with some of the works of great writers, so that, when they come to the point when it is necessary to study the history and development of art, they may meet the painters as old friends or at any rate as acquaintances, not as complete strangers.

I shall try to tell you as briefly as possible how we effect this introduction. Every term six pictures by a certain artist are set for study throughout the school, and you must know that at the end of each term every child in the school, however young, receives his or her set of pictures so that, in this way, from six years on, the children are making their own collections of reproductions.

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In the Lower Forms our object is that the children may learn simply to appreciate, not to produce. At the lesson each child has a monochrome reproduction before him for example, last autumn term of one of Jean François Millet’s pictures, in the spring term of one of Perugino’s. At the first lesson of a new term the teacher writes on the board the painter’s name and dates and perhaps tells some interesting fact about him (subsequent lessons begin with narration of last week’s picture), then the children look at the picture quite silently, with no comment from anyone. At the end of a few minutes they turn the pictures over and in turn as far as possible

avoiding repetition each child tells all he has found in or about it, noticing the most minute details and mentioning points which show real penetration and quite delightful appreciation. When all have said what they can the picture is looked at once more and any fresh discoveries are commented upon.

The following descriptions were dictated by two ten-year-olds at the end of picture talks:—

THE WASHERWOMAN. By J. F. MILLET.

“In the foreground there is a stream with rather a jutting out stone on which a French washerwoman is beating her clothes. She is kneeling on rather a high footstool; she wears very plain clothes and is rather fat. Just behind her there are two empty baskets, also some bushes on which some clothes are drying. In the background more or less on the left there are several thatched cottages nearly hidden by a hedge. Coming round in between the hedge and some trees, are a flock of geese, one of which is coming forward with a stretched neck and open beak towards a boy who has a baby in his arms. The baby is wrapped in very tight garments and the boy is leaning back, bravely trying to ward off the goose. It looks very quiet except for the quacking of the geese and it seems to be a fine day; the trees are bending, so therefore there is a slight breeze.”

THE SOWER. By J.F. MILLET.

“In the picture of the sower sowing his seeds it is towards evening and the sower himself looks as if he’s been working all day. He is sturdily built with a very determined air of finishing his task before night. He is to the fore in the picture. He is dressed in long trousers and boots and over his coat on his shoulder are empty seed bags. It is twilight and you cannot see his face very well. His left hand is clasping his empty seed bag and his right hand extended throwing seeds on to the ploughed field. Round his other shoulder is another seed bag full of seed. In the background it is much lighter and just on the horizontal line of the ploughed field there are two horses and a man harrowing. There is a very dark cloud before the horizon and before that there is a flock of birds looking as if, when the sower had finished, they would swoop down on the seed. On the left-hand side of the picture there is a hedge of trees and bushes. Just behind the hedge there is an ancient ruined tower. The picture has an air of quietness of evening in the country.”

Sometimes instead of spoken narration a sketch is made

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showing the grouping, light and shade and perhaps the position of an important figure.

In the Upper Forms a written narration may take the place of the last two methods and perhaps a rough sketch may be added, or the whole narration time may be spent in drawing.

In all the Forms the method is the same: to study the picture silently, narrate it in one way or another and then to look again in order that the impression left may be that of the

picture itself.

The following by girls of fourteen and fifteen respectively, were written during the last ten and fifteen minutes of half-hour picture studies:—

SPRING. By J. F. MILLET.

“‘Spring,’ by J. F. Millet, is a very beautiful picture and is a great contrast to his other work which has behind it a great sense of poverty and grinding work. But ‘Spring’ is full of happiness, radiant in the sunshine which has just burst forth from the clouded sky, for there has been a storm, and a rainbow, still very bright, is to be seen in the left-hand top corner.

“Running down the centre of the picture is a cart-track, very rough and still immersed in puddles, a sign of heavy rain. On the track in the centre are many sweet little flowers with the sun reflected on their upturned faces. The track leads to a fence and a gate over which stands a chestnut tree. Under the tree you can just distinguish the figure of a woman or man, clothed in a thick cloak, probably worn to protect her from the now passed storm.

“Beyond this, in the distance, rises a wooded slope with a beautiful clump of trees on the top, radiant with sunshine.

“On the left-hand side of the cart-track are a lot of dead tree-stumps looking as though they had been struck by lightning; but above them rises a beautiful cherry tree, laden with blossom. On the right-hand side is an apple tree, very gnarled and twisted, and the ground round about is wet and rough, the grass glittering in the sun.”

GIRL WATERING A COW. By J. F. MILLET.

“It’s dewy even and across the sky
Fly the dark clouds, all tinged with sunset hue,
And light on a fair maiden, poorly clad,
Who lightly holds her cow by slender string
Who drinks the clear still water of the pool,
And throws out her reflection, shadowy, dark.
The mere is lined with rugged rocks, and bogs
That make one shudder at their loneliness.
And yonder stands a gnarled and knotted oak
Making grim outline ’gainst the darkening sky.
Say you the maiden lonely is? not she,
For with her cow, her only friend, mayhap
Consists her world of toil and suffering,
And this the one last peaceful duty of the day.”

In Forms V. and VI. a more organised study is begun with the help of books on the history and development of art. The girls may read to themselves a section on a certain school, say

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the Spanish; then in class, after narration of the passage which has been read, we may take one of the principal painters, Velasquez or Ribera, for example. They study several reproductions of his works and then, choosing the one she prefers, each studies it for a few minutes, afterwards narrating it in writing or drawing. Later, an essay may be written on the particular school of painting with descriptions of some of the pictures.

We do not read descriptions to the children for there is little value in ready-made opinions, nor do we speak much for we want the children to reach the pictures by themselves, not through the passage of our minds. We do not as a rule use coloured reproductions: it seems that as a general rule they are only of value when one knows the original well. I think most people find that it is best to become familiar with all the beauties of a great picture in monochrome before seeing the original; perhaps my own experience will serve to illustrate the point. Not long ago in the P.U.S. we studied Vermeer's "Christ in the house of Martha," a picture with which, I am ashamed to say, I was quite unfamiliar. Now I had passed that picture every time I had been through the National Gallery in Edinburgh, but only after I had studied it in detail with the children and became familiar with its many beauties of form, grouping, light and shadow, did I experience for the first time a thrill of wonder at the marvellous glow of colour which suffuses the whole picture and which to my mind it would be impossible to reproduce.

I want to leave with you the idea of introducing the children to the Literature of Art as to the Literature of Books, that as the sight of a statue of Sir Walter Scott or of Charles Dickens may call forth from them a recital of the names of those of his works which they have read, with mention of favourite characters, so in the National Gallery the sight of Botticelli's "Nativity" or of Turner's "Frosty Morning" may produce a spontaneous narration of all the details noticed when the picture was studied. This is an experience which all should be able to enjoy.

One feels, I think that the founding of the Courtauld Institute, of which we read recently, marks an important step towards preserving England's tradition of appreciation which, said Lord Lee, "we are in danger of losing"; and surely children who have been brought up to love pictures are those

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who will in the future be most ready to benefit from such a school.

We want the children to grow up with the same feeling towards pictures as towards poetry and music, that "they are all the record or the expression of persons" and as such are of intense interest to us. In order to enjoy pictures it is not needful to think of them always in terms of "schools": one does not trouble over much to which group of poets Robert Browning belonged as one goes through *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, one simply loves it for all that it teaches of the way to meet life. In the same way one does not trouble much whether Raphael belonged more to the Florentine or the Umbrian school when one looks at his "Gran Duca Madonna," one just loves it for its beauty.

Pictures should be one of the links, those delightfully interchangeable links, in the chain of association without which life would be by so much the poorer, and we should work so that as certain stormy autumn days may call to mind "O wild west wind, thou breath of autumn's being," or the advancing summer induce one to re-learn "My heart aches, and a drowsy

numbness pains my sense,” so when the children read, for example, the parable of the Sower they may perhaps see in imagination Millet’s Sower, and narrate to themselves all that they found there, while unconsciously is formed the association between what Millet shows so unobtrusively of the meaning of hard work and what Jesus was teaching of the far-reaching results of the sower’s labours.